

A Healthy Smile for a Healthy Life



Having a healthy smile means so much more than having healthy teeth. It means living free of oral problems and diseases. “Oral” refers to the mouth, which includes the teeth, gums, and supporting tissues. It is easy to take your oral health for granted, but it is key to living each day comfortably. These tissues allow you to speak, smile, sigh, kiss, smell, taste, chew, and swallow. They also let you show a world of feelings through expressions. Taking good care of these tissues can prevent disease in them and throughout your body.

Oral Health and Your Body

How are the tissues in your mouth linked to health problems in other places in your body? Here’s how:

- Did you ever hear the phrase, “the mouth is a mirror?” The health of your mouth can be a sign of your overall health. Many serious diseases, such as diabetes, HIV, and some eating disorders, show their first symptoms in the mouth. This is why it is important to have complete, regular oral exams.
- Most of us think of problems with the mouth in terms of cavities, toothaches, and crooked or stained teeth. Lacking healthy teeth and gums has an effect on how we look, but it also affects the health of our bodies. For example:
 - If you have gum disease, you may be more likely to get heart disease.
 - Having missing teeth can affect your mental health because it can lead to not feeling good about yourself.
 - If you have diabetes, you may be more likely to get gum disease.
 - Studies show that if you have both diabetes and gum disease, you can have more problems controlling your blood sugar levels.

The Most Common Oral Health Problems—Cavities and Gum Disease

Dental cavities

Everyone is at risk for getting cavities throughout life. By the time most people are adults, 85 percent of people will have had a cavity!

Here's how it happens.

- You naturally have bacteria (germs) in your mouth.
- The bacteria mix with your saliva and bits of food in your mouth to form a coating (dental plaque) that sticks to your teeth.
- Acids in the plaque wear away the teeth.

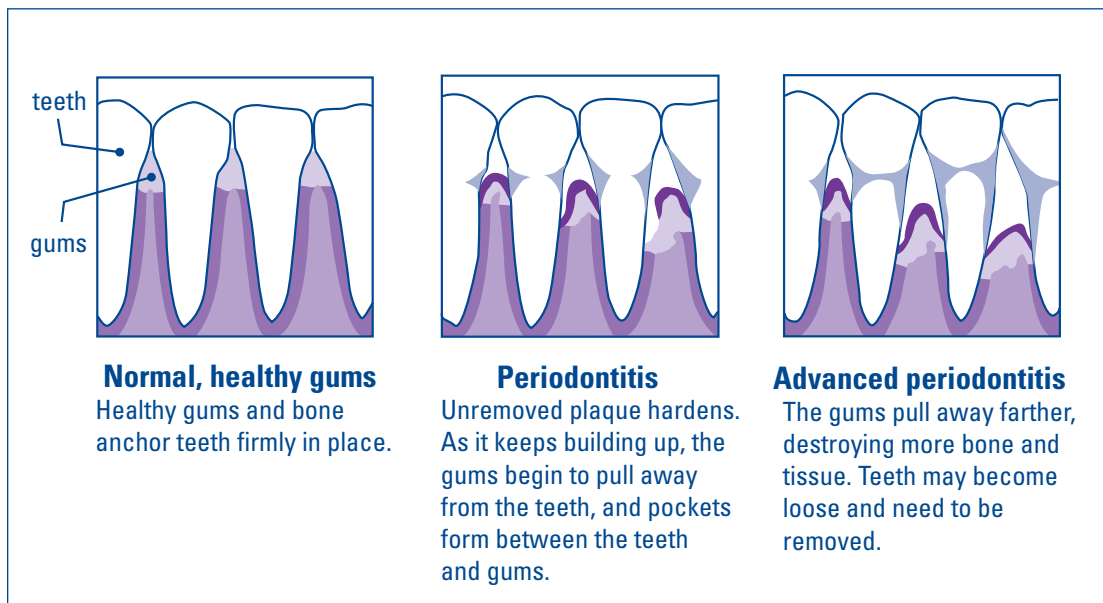
- These acids can get inside the teeth and create holes in the teeth, or cavities.

Gum diseases

Gum disease is caused by infection or plaque around your teeth and is a common cause of tooth loss after age 35. The first stage and most common type of gum disease is gingivitis (jin-ji-vie-tus).

Gingivitis irritates the gums and causes them to bleed and swell. Gum diseases are more often seen as people age, with most people showing signs of them by their mid-30s.

Periodontitis (pear-ee-o-don-tie-tus) is a more serious type of gum disease that, if left untreated, gets worse as pockets of infection form between the teeth and



gums. This causes your gums to grow away from teeth and lose supporting bone. If the teeth can't be supported, they could fall out. This disease results from bacteria in your mouth. You may be more likely to

be infected with these bacteria if:

- someone else in your family has periodontitis
- you are a smoker
- you have a disease like diabetes or HIV

Some other problems of the mouth include:

- **Cold sores (herpes simplex virus type 1 [HSV-1] infections)**

If you've ever had a cold sore, you're not alone. A half million people get one every year. Once exposed to this virus, it can hide in the body for years.

Getting too much sun, having mild fevers that occur with a cold, or stress can trigger the virus and cause tiredness, muscle aches, sore throat, enlarged and tender lymph nodes, and cold sores.

These sores or blisters are very contagious and usually form on the lips and sometimes under the nose or under the chin. The sores heal in about 7 to 10 days without scarring.

You can buy medicines at the drug store or grocery store to put on the cold sore to numb or relieve the pain. If cold sores are a problem for you, talk with your doctor or dentist about a prescription for an antiviral drug to help lower your chances of getting these kinds of viral infections.

- **Canker sores**

These common, but mostly harmless, sores appear as ulcers with a white or

gray base and a red border inside the mouth. They occur in women more often than men, often during their periods. The reason why they appear is unknown, but some experts believe that problems with the immune system (the system in our bodies that fights disease), bacteria, or viruses may be involved.

Fatigue, stress, or allergies can increase your chances of getting a canker sore. You also might get one if you have a cut inside your cheek or on your tongue.

Canker sores tend to be tiny and heal by themselves in one to three weeks. If you get a large sore (larger than one centimeter) though, it may need to be treated with medicine. Staying away from hot and spicy foods can help the pain. Using mild mouthwashes or salt water, or swabbing the sore with a mixture of hydrogen peroxide and water, or milk of magnesia, might also help. There is no proven way to prevent canker sores, but if you get them often, take note of anything that might be irritating your mouth, and talk to your doctor, nurse, or dentist.

- **Oral fungal or yeast infections (candidiasis [can-di-die-uh-sis])**

These infections appear as red or white lesions, flat or slightly raised, in the mouth. They are common among denture wearers and occur most often in people who are very young, elderly, or who have a problem with their immune system (the system in our bodies that fights disease). People who have dry mouth syndrome are also very likely to get oral yeast infections.

These infections can be prevented with good oral hygiene. If you wear dentures, clean and remove them at bedtime. Talk with your doctor or dentist about medicines that may be helpful if you have a problem with these infections.

- **Dry mouth syndrome**

This is common in many adults, especially as they age. It may make it hard to eat, swallow, taste, and speak. It happens when salivary glands fail to work right, often as a side effect from medicines or from other health problems. If left untreated, it can lead to cavities because saliva helps rid your mouth of bits of food and helps stop acid from forming plaque on your teeth.

- **Oral cancer**

This cancer most often occurs in people older than 40. It is often found at late

stages when it is harder to treat. This is because oral cancer is not usually painful—so you may not know you have it. And many people do not visit their dentists often enough to find the cancer early.

The most common sites of oral cancer are on the tongue, the lips, and the floor of the mouth. Use of tobacco, especially with alcohol, is the main cause for these cancers.

Oral cancer often starts as a tiny, unnoticed white or red spot or sore anywhere in the mouth. Other signs include:

- a sore that bleeds easily or does not heal
- a color change of the oral tissues
- a lump, thickening, rough spot, crust or small eroded area
- pain, tenderness, or numbness anywhere in the mouth or on the lips
- problems chewing, swallowing, speaking, or moving the jaw or tongue
- a change in the way the teeth fit together

- **Oral problems from cancer therapies.**

Treatments like chemotherapy or radiation to the head and neck can cause dry mouth, tooth decay, painful mouth sores, and cracked, peeling lips.



Oral Health and Women

You need to have good oral hygiene at all stages of your life. As a woman, your changing hormone levels during puberty, menstruation (your monthly period), and menopause cause changes in your mouth. These hormone changes can cause:

- frequent cold sores and canker sores
- gingivitis during puberty
- dry mouth (often also linked to using certain medicines)
- changes in sensation or taste
- increased risk of gum disease
- bone weakness around menopause

Oral Health and Pregnancy

If you are pregnant, you have special oral health needs.

- Try to have a complete oral exam before or very early in your pregnancy. All needed dental work should be done before the pregnancy or between the fourth and sixth month of pregnancy, if treatment is needed. It is possible to have urgent treatment for a problem during pregnancy, but it can present risks to your baby. Treatments are most dangerous during the first three months. If you are in the last three months of pregnancy you may have treatment, but you may find the dental chair uncomfortable.
- If you haven't already, start practicing good oral hygiene and eat a healthy diet. Be complete in brushing and flossing your teeth daily. By doing this you can control your risk for gum inflammation and disease.
- Some pregnant women get gum disease—a problem called pregnancy gingivitis—which raises their chances for getting more serious gum disease. This condition can be caused both by poor oral hygiene and increased hormone levels during pregnancy. Having this problem can then make you less likely to brush and floss the right way or as much as you need.
- Pregnant women with gum diseases are much more likely to have premature babies of low birth weight.



Oral Health and New Mothers

Here's what you should know.

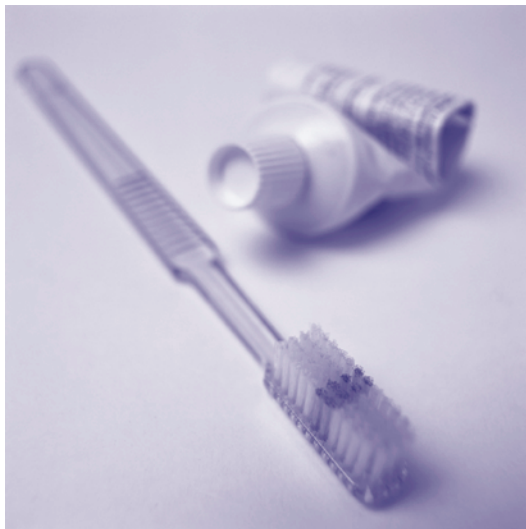
- The same germs that cause tooth decay in your mouth can be passed to your baby if you put your baby's items (such as toys, spoons, pacifiers) in your mouth.
- Wiping your baby's teeth and gums with a soft cloth or a baby's toothbrush after each nursing and feeding can help remove sugars found in milk that can cause tooth decay.
- If you bottle-feed your baby, it should end by age one. Never put your baby to bed with a bottle of milk or juice. Never place a pacifier covered with honey or sugar in your baby's mouth when he or she sleeps. Sucking on a bottle when lying down can destroy the baby's teeth causing years of tooth pain and problems eating.
- Pediatricians and pediatric dentists suggest that all babies have an oral exam between one and two years old. This is to screen for problems in your child's mouth and for problems with the way you might be feeding him or her. You also can learn how to properly care for your child's teeth and mouth.

Toothpastes and Mouthwashes

There are so many types of toothpastes to choose from! Some say they're made for whitening, others for reducing gingivitis and plaque, and others for sensitive teeth. You should feel good choosing whatever brand and flavor you like if you know these basics.

- As long as the toothpaste contains fluoride and its box has the American Dental Association's (ADA) seal of acceptance, it is good for your oral health. Beyond that, using toothpastes based on what they claim to do is a personal choice.
- Mouthwashes claim to freshen your breath, but they really only mask breath odor for a few hours. If you must constantly use a breath freshener to hide bad mouth odor, see your dentist.
- If you need extra help controlling plaque, your dentist might suggest using an antiseptic mouth rinse. Many of these





products are accepted by the ADA because they reduce plaque and gum disease, and they help kill the germs that cause bad breath.

- You also may want to use a fluoride mouth rinse, along with brushing and flossing, to help prevent tooth decay.

Tooth Whitening or Bleaching

You might want to whiten teeth more than is possible through regular brushing, flossing, and checkups. There are several options that vary in price and in how well they work.

- **Chairside bleaching or “power bleaching.”** In your dentist’s office, he or she applies a gel or rubber shield to protect your gums and oral tissues, then puts a bleach on your teeth. Ask if the bleaching agents have the ADA Seal. A

special light or a laser may be used to help the bleach work better, but no products that use lasers are accepted right now by the ADA. With this method you may have to go for more than one visit. You will see results right away (about five shades brighter), and it works well on a range of stains.

- **Professionally dispensed bleaching solutions.** These products are for use at home, and you get them from your dentist. They contain peroxide(s), which actually bleach the tooth enamel. Most come in a gel and are placed in a mouth guard or tray that fits inside your mouth around your teeth. How long you use them depends on what results you’re looking for and if you are sensitive to the bleach. Some products are used for about twice a day for two weeks, and others are used overnight for one to two weeks. They help many types of staining (about six shades brighter with long-lasting results).



- **Over-the-counter, TV, and Internet products.** These products are for use at home and include whitening strips, paint-on products, and gels and trays. They have a low amount of peroxide. You wear some during the day and apply some at night before bedtime. They have limited results without first having professional removal of the stains. But they can help prolong the results you get from professional removal. They can help staining because of age and certain foods (about two shades brighter for up to six months). None of these gels and trays are accepted by the ADA.
- **Whitening toothpastes.** All toothpastes help remove surface stain through the action of mild abrasives. “Whitening” toothpastes that have the ADA seal have special polishing agents that remove even more stains. Unlike bleaches, these products do not change the actual color of teeth. They help

Before you use any whitening products, talk with your dentist first. He or she can help you decide which method is best for the type of stains that are on your teeth. Not all products will work on all people. Options offered by your dentist can be expensive, so be certain to ask your dentist to fully explain what results you can really expect. Keep in mind that whitening your teeth alone does not make your mouth any healthier.



slight surface stains only (temporary results with claims of one to two shades brighter).

Keep Smiling! Steps You Can Take to Keep Your Mouth Healthy

1. Brush your teeth at least twice each day (aim for first thing in the morning and before going to bed). Once a day, use floss or an interdental cleaner to clean between teeth to remove food that your toothbrush missed.

Make sure you take these actions.

- Drink fluoridated water and use fluoride toothpaste. Fluoride’s protection against dental decay works at all ages. You also may want to use a fluoride mouth rinse, along with brushing and flossing, to help prevent tooth decay.

- Gently brush all sides of your teeth with a soft-bristled brush and a fluoride toothpaste. Circular and short back-and-forth strokes work best.
- Take time to brush along the gum line, and lightly brush your tongue to help remove plaque and food debris.
- Ask your dentist to show you the best way to floss your teeth.
- Change your toothbrush at least every three months or earlier if the toothbrush looks worn. A new toothbrush can remove more plaque than one that's more than three months old.
- If you wear dentures, be sure to remove them at night and clean them before putting them back in the next morning.

2. Have a healthy lifestyle.

- Eat healthy meals. Cut down on tooth decay by brushing after meals and not snacking on sugary or starchy foods between meals.
- Don't smoke. Smoking raises your risk for getting gum disease, oral and throat cancers, and oral fungal infections.
- If you drink alcohol, only drink it in moderation (no more than one drink per day for women or two drinks per day for men). Heavy alcohol use raises your risk for oral and throat cancers. When alcohol and tobacco are used together, your risk for oral cancers is even greater than using one of these alone.



3. Get regular checkups.

- Having an oral exam twice each year will help find signs of problems early. During regular checkups, dentists and other types of dental providers can find signs of nutritional deficiencies, diseases, infections, immune disorders, injuries, and some cancers.
- Make an appointment right away if your gums bleed often, if you see any red or white patches on the gums or tongue, have mouth or jaw pain that won't go away, have sores that do not heal within two weeks, or if you have problems swallowing or chewing.

4. Follow your dentist's advice.

Your dentist may suggest that you do different things to keep your mouth healthy. He or she can teach you how to properly floss or brush, and how often. He or she might suggest preventive steps or treatments to keep your mouth healthy.

5. If you have another health problem, think how it may affect your oral health.

For instance:

- If you take medicines that give you a dry mouth, ask your doctor or nurse if there's another drug you can use instead.
- Have an oral exam before beginning cancer treatment to help prevent or limit other oral problems or tissue damage.
- If you have diabetes, practice good oral hygiene to prevent gum disease.

Besides your dentist, here are some other types of dental providers.

- Dental hygienists – work as part of your dentist's staff. They clean gums and teeth and instruct patients on ways to prevent oral disease and to maintain oral health.
- Periodontists – dentists who treat gum disease and place dental implants, or artificial teeth, to replace lost teeth.
- Oral surgeons – dentists who can perform biopsies (taking a sample of tissue in your mouth to look at under a microscope) or surgery on your mouth and supporting tissues if you have a serious problem.



Then and Now

In the past, patients have been very fearful of going to the periodontist. Now, these doctors report that because of less painful treatments and better ways to control pain, many treatments are pain free. In fact, in a survey, many periodontists said that women are less likely than men to be afraid of periodontal procedures. *From the American Academy of Periodontology*